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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of a New England Cooperative Extension Consortium created for the purpose of developing new approaches for meeting the Cooperative Extension mandate. The consortium formalizes a tradition of informal, multi-state cooperation among the New England Cooperative Extension Systems which operate as a flexible, evolving collaborative model for delivery of research-based knowledge to the citizens of the region. A design team outlined application of the model for an agricultural commodity focus and a topical issue focus. The model was derived from two primary motivations: (1) the public's need for educational programs and information requiring the cooperative extension systems to find ways to most efficiently and effectively fulfill their educational mandate; and (2) the continuing need to maintain the quality and scope of cooperative extension programs in the face of reductions in budgets for funding staff and operations. Discussed are the goals and parameters of the Consortium, the development of the Consortium model, and the criteria for selecting Consortium programs. The paper concludes with a general description of the Consortium model. (GLR)

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THE NEW ENGLAND COOPERATIVE EXTENSION CONSORTIUM PROJECT
A SYNOPSIS

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Project Origins

In 1988 the Presidents of the New England land-grant universities asked their Directors of Cooperative Extension to consider a regional strategic plan. There was agreement that the intensifying needs of Extension's audiences, increasingly scarce resources, and new demands on Cooperative Extension at the state and federal level, required new approaches for meeting the Cooperative Extension mandate. Greater collaboration among the states could improve efficiency, increase access to professional expertise by clientele, and allow flexibility in meeting state and national priorities. Supporting this vision are the facts that New England in total is no larger geographically than some states, the states are contiguous, and they have many similarities in agricultural, economic, environmental, and social conditions.

A "consortium" appeared to be an organizational concept that could address the concerns of the Presidents and Directors. The magnitude and consequences of formalizing such a collaborative arrangement clearly required careful study. Therefore, the Directors commissioned the development of a formal plan, both to define the intent and scope of a regional consortium, and to serve as a model for organization and implementation.

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The New England Presidents provided initial funding for the study. Additional funding was received from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Extension Service - USDA, and the Northeast Center for Rural Development. A full-time Project Director was hired and the New England Directors committed the time and travel support for one staff person from each state to serve on the Consortium Design Team.

Goals and Parameters of a Consortium

The Directors identified the goals for a New England Cooperative Extension Consortium. They were (are):

1. To improve public access to technical expertise, educational programs, and informational materials.
2. To maintain and enhance the quality of assistance, materials, and programs offered to the public.
3. To increase the efficiency with which programs are developed and delivered.

The Directors also placed some constraints on the Consortium model: (a) The Consortium would not supplant the existing separate Cooperative Extension Systems; (b) consortium program activity would complement and strengthen on-going state programs, not replace or compete with them; (c) the Consortium model would apply only to programs specifically sanctioned by the Directors from participating states; and (d) not all member states would be required to participate in every program or activity sponsored by the Consortium.

Developing A Consortium Model

The main focus of consortium model development was a set of structural/operational elements that would define the scope and operating methods for a New England Cooperative Extension Consortium.. Alternatives and options were defined and evaluated by the Design Team. A preferred set of options emerged to form the basis for a New England Cooperative Extension Consortium model.

To test the feasibility of this model, the Design Team outlined the manner in which the model could be implemented for a agricultural commodity focus (a multistate dairy program) and a topical issue focus (a multistate program on food safety).

Elements of the Consortium Model

The options for the several basic structural and operational elements of the consortium were defined. In addition to identifying model elements, a set of "Pros and Cons" were identified for each option. This approach allowed a more thorough consideration of the alternative structures and operating procedures that might be incorporated in a consortium model. The elements addressed included the following:

* Consortium Policy, Program Prioritizing, Resource Allocations
* Consortium Coordination
* Staff Support for Consortium Coordination Functions
* Citizen Input to Consortium Programs
* Program Development and Delivery
* Consortium Extension Specialists

* External Funding

* Consortium Travel Policies

* Communications and Information Access Technology

The Design Team developed a set of "Preliminary Models" for assessing consistency, completeness, simplicity, and potential for practical implementation. This process also helped define the feasible options that might become elements of a consortium model for New England Cooperative Extension.

Following this study and evaluation, a recommended model was constructed that would meet the stated goals, and function within the financial, programmatic, and institutional parameters set by the New England Directors. The study report also provided suggestions for the implementation of a consortium structure and operational procedures.

Criteria for Selection of Consortium Programs

A set of criteria were developed to provide guidance in the identification of appropriate consortium programs. New and existing programs will be considered for regional consortium identification only when they meet these criteria and share similar goals, objectives, and target audiences. Proposed consortium sponsored program must:

a. enhance the quality of educational programs for the region,

b. enhance the effectiveness of educational programs and have measurable impact,

c. enhance the efficiency of program development and delivery thus maximizing returns from invested resources,

d. enhance funding either through combined resources or from external sources.

In addition, the following questions will receive consideration:

a. Does the educational subject matter have equal applicability throughout the region?

b. Does the nature of the subject matter make programming especially expensive for individual states?

c. Are there delivery modes that will permit efficient access and delivery of programs to participants living in the several states?

d. Can agreement be reached on goals, approaches, outcomes, and deadlines for completion?

A General Description of the Model

The Cooperative Extension Consortium Model contains a set of critical elements as follows:

1. The New England Cooperative Extension Consortium will be established through ratification of a formal partnership agreement between the six systems.

2. A Consortium Policy Board, comprising the six Cooperative Extension Directors, will be responsible for establishing consortium policies, program priorities and direction, operational procedures, resource support, oversight, and the establishment, continuation or termination of consortium programs.

3. The Policy Board will appoint an "Assistant for Multi-State Programming"

who will provide staff support and have responsibility for coordinating Consortium operations and reporting to the Board.

4. For a given consortium program, one of the state Cooperative Extension systems will have designated responsibility for necessary financial management.

5. A set of guidelines for identifying and selecting regional programs are established (described in the preceding section).

6. The Extension faculty, functioning as consortium program teams, form the driving power in planning, conducting, and evaluating educational programs.

7. The consortium policy board and program teams will continue to rely on the involvement and support of citizens for grassroots input on needs, priorities, and program content.

8. An advanced communication and program delivery network utilizing available electronic technology will be used to more efficiently and effectively carry out the extension mission.

Concluding Comments

The development of the New England Cooperative Extension Consortium was stimulated by both needs for efficiency and the promise of strengthened programs through collaborative effort. The Consortium formalizes a tradition of informal, multi-state cooperation among the New England Cooperative Extension Systems. It is intended to operate as a flexible, evolving collaborative model for delivery of research-based knowledge to the citizens of the region. It derives from two primary motivations.

First, the public's need for educational programs and information requires that the state Cooperative Extension Systems find ways to most efficiently and effectively fulfill their educational mandate. Secondly, there is continuing need to maintain the quality and scope of Cooperative Extension programs in the face of reductions in budgets funding staff and operations.

The consortium, with new and strengthened structures and operational procedures, is expected to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and synergistic creativity that will have benefits for citizens in each of the member states. Indeed, the continued viability of the Cooperative Extension concept may well depend on the ability of the Consortium to demonstrate those expected outcomes.

CITATIONS

"Shared Vision - An Implementation Plan for the New England Cooperative Extension Consortium." Report of the Directors of the Cooperative Extension Organizations of the New England Land-Grant Universities. David R. Sanderson, Editor. January, 1992.